



"Degrees of adverbialization. A cross-linguistic corpus study of 'far from X' constructions"

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Abstract

In language change, parallel source constructions can undergo cross-linguistically divergent developments. The focus of this paper is on one such case, the development of degree modifiers from markers of physical distance. Specifically, we will compare the semantic and syntactic properties of FAR FROM constructions in three Germanic languages and one Romance language: English [far from X], Dutch [ver(re) van X], Swedish [långt ifrån X] and French [loin de X]. In all four languages, the spatial construction consists of an adjective or adverb and a preposition, followed by an NP. Further, in all four languages, the construction tends to develop adverbial degree modifying uses (as a downtoner), as illustrated for English in (1), and for Swedish in (2). Its X-slot then tends to open up to other phrase types (VP, AP, PP). (1) Nutty was far from sure, and Biddy looked doubtful. (BNC) (2) de långt ifrån marginella förändringar landet genomgår. (SECOW2014) 'the far from marginal cha...

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Degrees of adverbialization

A cross-linguistic
corpus-study of 'far
from X' constructions

Introduction (1)

- **Topic:** [*far from X*] construction:
 - Fr. [*loin de X*]
 - Eng. [*far from X*]
 - Du. [*ver / verre van X*]
 - Sw. [*långtifrån / långt ifrån X*]
- **Parallel source:** [Adj/Adv_{spat} Prep X]
- **Parallel semantics** (in synchrony):
 - (1) spatial distance
 - (2) metaphorical distance
 - (3) degree modifier (downtoner)

Introduction (2)

- **Spatial distance:**

- (1) On était **loin de** la ville. (FRCOW2011)
'We were far from the city.'
- (2) Green willow is a modern , fresh house set in a wonderful garden near East Preston village , not **far from** the sea . (UKCOW2011)
- (3) De appel valt nooit **ver van** de boom. (NLCOW2012)
'The apple never falls far from the tree.'
- (4) Och om du inte kan hålla dig, stå **långt ifrån** mig. (SVCOW2014)
'And if you cannot control yourself, stand far from me'

Introduction (3)

○ Metaphorical distance:

- (5) Nous voilà **loin de** la mondialisation heureuse!
(FRCOW2011)
'Here we are far from happy globalization!'
- (6) Her centralized , authoritarian populism is quite **far from** the ideology which i'd imagine both of us seek . (UKCOW2011)
- (7) De gedachte om kritiek op je te leveren staat **ver van** me. (NLCOW2012)
'The thought of criticizing you is far from me.'
- (8) Nu var det så **långt ifrån** bröstmjök man kan komma.
(SVCOW2014)
'Now, this was as far from breast milk as it gets.'

Introduction (4)

● Degree modifier (downtoner):

- (9) Or, c'est **loin d'**être le cas. (FRCOW2011)
'But this is far from being the case.'
- (10) But it is **far from** certain that this means that the public wish to see the strongest and most explicit images available on television (...) (UKCOW2011)
- (11) Maar David was **verre van** perfect. (NLCOW2012)
'But David was far from perfect.'
- (12) Och inne i varuhuset var det **långt ifrån** fullt! (SVCOW2014)
'And inside the department store it was far from crowded!'

Introduction (5)

- **Different outcomes?**

- Category change:
from [adverb/adjective + preposition] to
adverbial downtoner
 - $[[far]_A [from]_{Prep} [X]_{NP}]_{AP} \leftrightarrow \text{'distant from X'}$
 - $[[far from]_{Adv} [X]_{Adj}]_{AP} \leftrightarrow \text{'not X at all'}$
- Different degrees of 'adverbialization'?

Outline

1. Method
2. Comparison semantics
3. Comparison construction types
(complementation patterns)
4. Discussion structural differences
5. Conclusions

Method

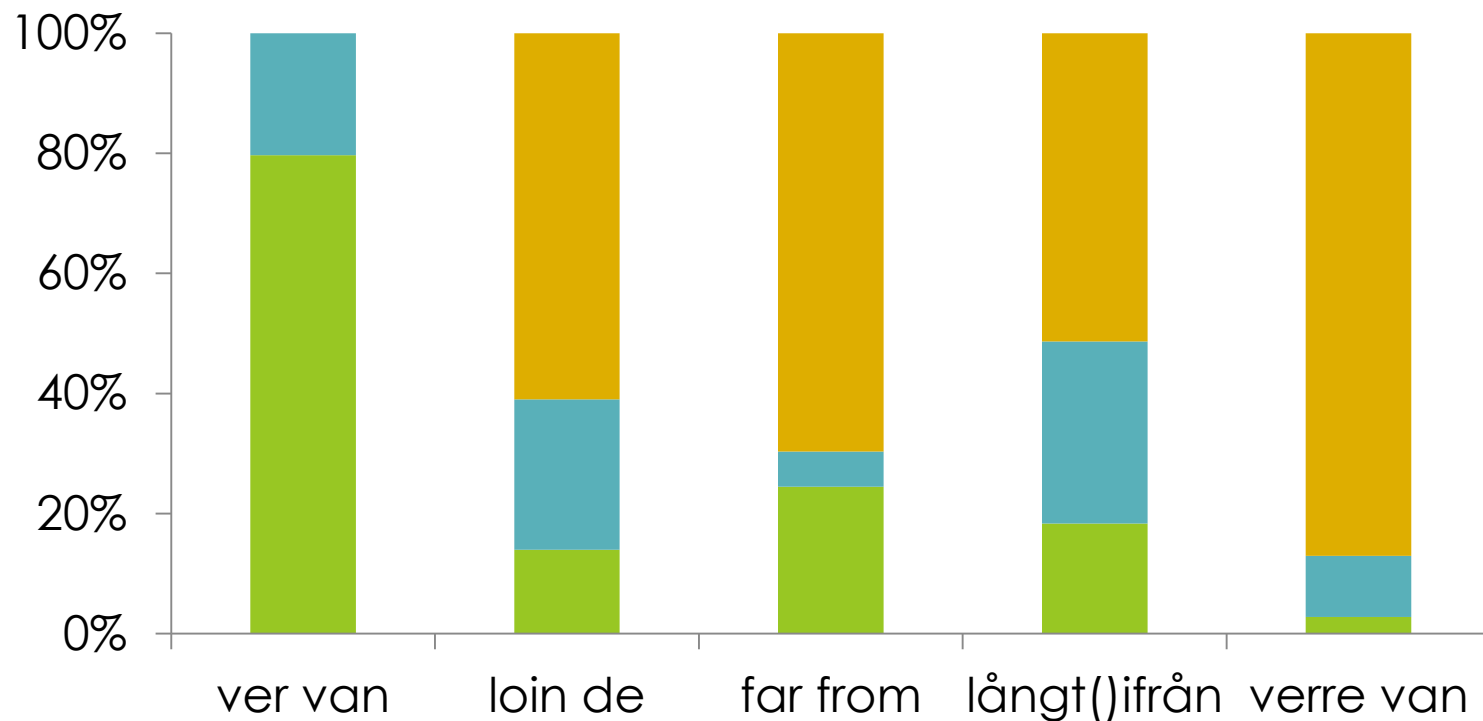
- **A synchronic cross-linguistic corpus study**
 - COW corpus (COrpora from the Web, cf. Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012):
 - FRCOW2011XS / UKCOW2011XS / NLCOW2012-00X / SVCOW14AX
 - 300 random tokens per language

[Diachronic analysis: cf. De Smet et al. 2014, Van Goethem et al., subm.]

1. Comparison semantics

Comparison semantics

■ Spatial distance ■ Metaphorical distance ■ Downtoner

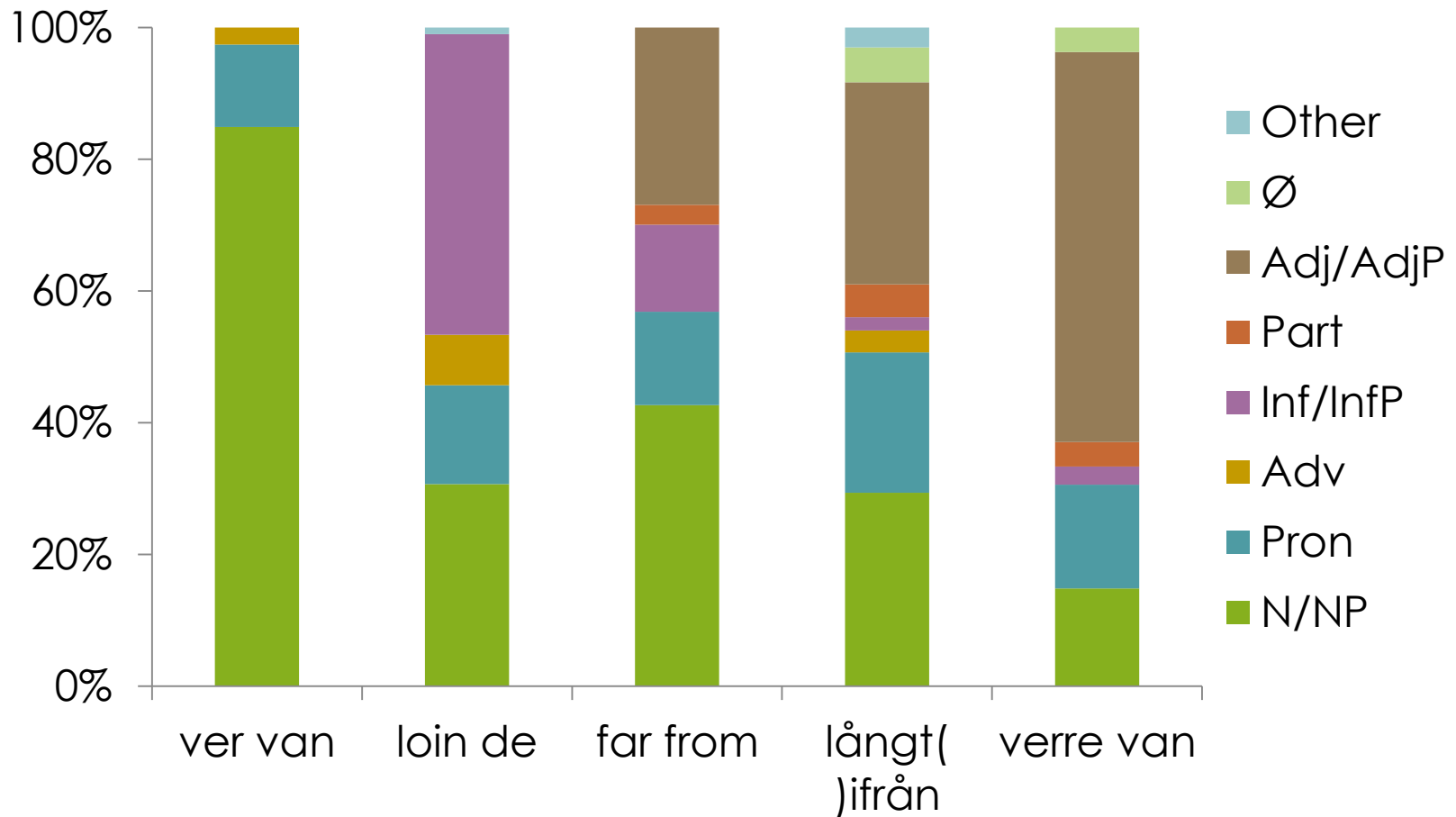


Comparison semantics

- Dutch *ver van* is almost never used with downtoner meaning
- Dutch *verre van* is almost never used with spatial meaning
- French, English and Swedish ['far from X']-constructions display the full range of meanings, in somewhat varying proportions

2. Comparison construction types

Complementation: POS of X



Complementation: POS of X

- Dutch *verre van* and Swedish *långtifrån* show the widest array of complement types, including verbs, adjectives as well as absolute uses
- Dutch *ver van* takes (almost) exclusively pronominal and nominal complements
- French and English take inbetween positions
- Nominalized clauses are most prevalent with French *loin de* and English *far from*

3. Discussion: structural differences

French [*loin de X*]

• Form/function mismatch

- [*loin de X*]: downtoner meaning, but no adverbial properties
(13) La liste est **loin d'ê**tre exhaustive. (FRCOW2011)
'The list is far from being exhaustive.'
***loin d'**exhaustive
- No absolute use (**loin de*)

◉ Possible causes ?

- Strong cohesion of [*de* + complement]
 - clitic form *d'* (*loin d'être...*, *loin des musées*)
 - *de* as infinitival complementizer (*Il est important de rouler prudemment*)
 - Separation *loin* / *de* (*loin des théâtres et des musées ; l'hôtel est situé loin, pense-t-il, des théâtres*)
- *de* has a high degree of semantic bleaching (“prépositions vides”)
 - no preposition stranding (**là je suis encore loin de*)

[cf. Melis 2003]

English [*far from X*]

- Partial adverbialization
 - *Far from* is acceptable with adjectives
 - But it resists use with verbs
 - (14) This brief review **far from** exhausts the ways electronic computers can help in forest mensuration. (Google Books)
 - And *far from* has no absolute use
 - (15) Not that he had tried. **Far from** it. (Google Books)
 - (16) *Not that he had tried. Far from.

English [*far from X*]

◉ Possible causes?

- ◉ *Far* could adverbialize due to ambiguity between
 - ◉ *far from* + gerund (= nominalized clause)
 - ◉ *far from* + progressive tense (= verb phrase)
- ◉ Compare
 - (17) you are **far from** endeavouring to destroy them
(say you) (1659, EEBOCorp)
 - (18) [...] the discourse and words which here we are
endeavouring to explicate (1659, EEBOCorp)

English [*far from X*]

- Possible causes?

- BUT: *Far* retains adjectivelike-behaviour even when *far from* functions as downtoner

(19) Since the characters were far from perfect, the look of the show would be just as **far from perfect** as well. (Google Books)

(20) The **further from** perfect your parents were [...], the more unfinished business you can have as an adult. (Google Books)

--> Conservative pull of adjectival *far*?

Dutch [*ver* / *verre van* X]

o Functional split:

- [*ver van* X]:
 - Spatial/metaphorical meaning
 - Nominal complements
- [*verre van* X]
 - Mostly downtoner meaning
 - Degree adverb (+ Adj, Ø)

(21) Dit was een **verre van** marginaal verschijnsel. (NLCOW2012)

'This was a far from marginal phenomenon.'

(22) Ik zeg niet dat hier alles beter is, **verre van**, zou ik haast zeggen.
(NLCOW2012)

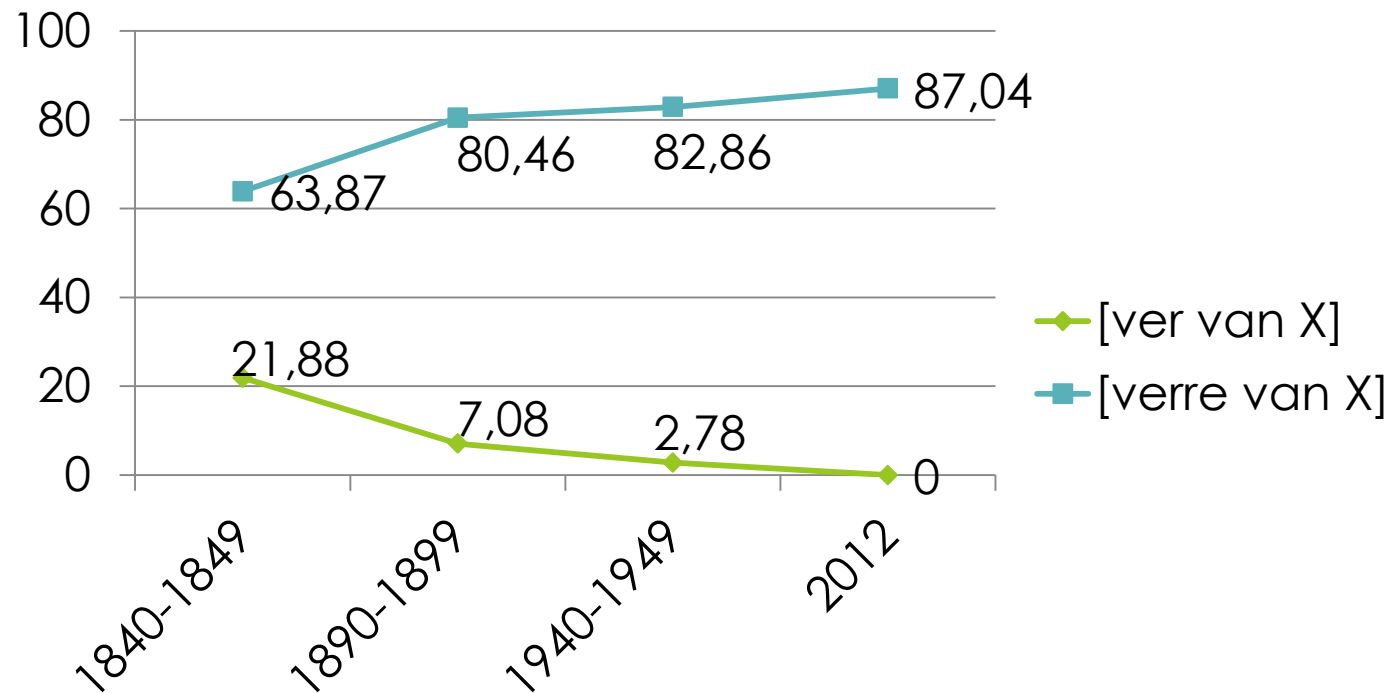
'I'm not saying here everything is better, far from it, I'd almost say.'

○ Possible causes:

- **Form-function asymmetry** → 'exaptation' of the obsolete form *verre van* to express the new downtoner meaning
- **Subsequent host-class expansion** (cf. Van Goethem et al., subm.):
 - + Part, Adj_{Pred}
 - < Word order: [*verre van* + Part/Adj] available chunk in nominalized clauses:
 - *Deze vraag is nog verre van beantwoord (te zijn)*
 - *Hij schijnt verre van sympathiek (te zijn)*
 - + Adj_{Attr}
 - < Dutch attributive slot allows complex sequences
 - cf. 'een vanavond nog nader bekend te maken bedrag'
 - + Absolute use
 - < Possibility of preposition stranding
 - cf. *Daar hou ik niet van; Daar hou ik me verre van*

Evolution downtoner uses

(cf. Van Goethem et al., submitted)



Swedish [*långtifrån* / *långt ifrån* X]

- Adverbial properties
 - collocates with verbs:

(23) Svenska folket har **långt ifrån** slutat att konsumera dem (SVCOW14AX)
 'The Swedish people have far from stopped to consume them'
 - occurs in syntactic slot for sentence adverbs in subordinate clauses, i.e. before the tensed verb:

(24) Jag tror att vi **långt ifrån** är färdiga med varandra (SVCOW14AX)
 'I think that we far from are finished with each other'
 - absolute use:

(25) Inte ett av mina bästa år, **långt ifrån**. (SVCOW14AX)
 'Not one of my best years, far from (it)'

○ Possibly related phenomena?

- Unlike in French, Swedish adpositions may select a wide variety of complements
- Like in English, *långt ifrån* may however still be modified by an adverb when used as a downtoner:

(26) Jag är **väldigt långt ifrån** glad
 'I am very far from happy'

- Like in Dutch, a split occurs between *långt ifrån* (spatial and metaphorical distance) and unverbated *långtifrån* (5,3% in sample)
 - These differences in spelling are prescribed by the Grammar of the Swedish Academy.
 - But they are often violated (general tendency in Swedish to write compound words separately)

4. Conclusions

○ Cline of adverbialization:

- ver van > loin de > far from > verre van / långt()ifrån

	<i>ver van</i>	<i>loin de</i>	<i>far from</i>	<i>verre van</i>	<i>långt()ifrån</i>
+ NP	+	+	+	+	+
+ Part	-	-	+	+	+
+ Adj_{Pred}	-	-	+	+	+
+ Adj_{Attr}	-	-	+	+	+
Absolute use	-	-	-	+	+

Conclusions

- **A north-south cline**

- **Commonalities:**

- ['far from X] constructions in all four languages develop downtoner-like meanings
- In all four languages these occur with (i) noun phrases and (ii) nominalized clauses

- **Differences:**

- Adverbialization reflected in host-class expansion in English *far from* Dutch *verre van*, and Swedish *långt ifrån*
- Host-class expansion is more advanced in Dutch *verre van* and Swedish *långt ifrån* than in English *far from*

Conclusions

- ◉ **Possible causes:**

- ◉ Word order: Dutch *verre van* + Adj is an available chunk in nominalized clauses, contrary to English and French:

ze lijkt verre van sympathiek (te zijn)

... loin d'être sympa

... far from being nice

- ◉ English nominalized clauses sometimes resemble progressive verb phrases (*...are far from questioning...*)
- ◉ Availability of two forms in Dutch supported form-function differentiation
- ◉ Swedish adpositions are generally less restrictive on the types of complement they select for

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